DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 002 SP 030 600

TITLE	How Do Teachers Communicate? ERIC Digest 2-88.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	88
CONTRACT	400-83-0022
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; *Research Utilization; *Standardized Tests; State Standards; *Teacher Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Literature on evaluating the communication skills of teachers is briefly reviewed in this paper. Topics under consideration include how different states evaluate communication, how communication should be evaluated, whether or not state assessments reflect current research on teacher assessment, and how useful is the attempt to assess communication skills. (JD)

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HOW DO TEACHERS COMMUNICATE?

ERIC DIGEST 2-88

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON TEACHER EDUCATION

ERIC DIGEST 2-88

1988

How Do Teachers Communicate?

The last decade has seen a rise in the demand for testing teachers, brought on by a real or perceived decline in student performance, as well as concern over the quality and preparation of people entering the profession. An increased sense of urgency was sounded in recent reports calling for national standards for teachers: the Holmes' Group report, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (1986); the Carnegie Commission report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1986); and the National Governors' Association report, *Time for Results* (1986). In response, many states have adopted formal assessment procedures for teachers, almost all of which claim to evaluate communication abilities. However, the methods of assessment vary from state to state with the result that communication is defined in different ways across the country. Furthermore, the operational definitions found in various state assessment practices often don't correspond with those developed through research.

How do states evaluate communication?

Most states use standardized written examinations and many use performance tests, as well. In 1986, 31 states administered some form of the National Teachers Examination (NTE), while many of the others gave their own written exams. In performance testing, two states developed and administered their own standardized speaking tests, 16 required the Listening Section of the NTE Core Battery Exam, nine used a variety of procedures, and ten others are developing such tests or considering doing so (McCaleb).

A significant area in which the nine states differ from each other is in the instructions given evaluators concerning their focus and participation in the assessment process. Some states, for example, set the focus on the teacher's performance only, while others include the teacher's classroom interaction with students and the teacher's use of students' ideas in the assessment. The same is true regarding the role given observers. Some states permit assessors to use professional judgment in making final evaluations, while others confine them to recording behaviors for computer analysis, preventing them from knowing how these will combine to pass or fail a teacher (McCaleb).

In performance tests given by the same nine states, 12 categories of communication were defined: oral language usage, fluency, feedback, speech mechanics, subject knowledge, explaining, emphasis, directing, questioning, using students' ideas, interacting with parents, and enthusiasm and nonverbal communication. Not all the states used every category, but in cases where they did use the same ones, different criteria for judging were found—or if the same criteria were used, they may have been assigned different values, giving different degrees of importance to the same set of skills (McCaleb). The danger in these varied and sometimes superficial approaches to communication assessment is that judgments could be based on an incomplete or fragmented picture of a teacher's communication skills (Feezel).

How should communication be evaluated?

State assessments should be designed and implemented according to a valid and coherent conception of the complex process of classroom communication. Assessors need to focus on the many aspects of communication instead of stressing the informing function of explaining and questioning. Other forms of communication skills need to be assessed, particularly interactive ones such as those required in one-on-one conferences and interviews, organizing small group tasks, and leading class discussions. At present, assessment practices emphasize two distinct roles and sets of skills: the teacher-as-speaker (in performance testing) and the teacher-as-listener (through standardized testing). Interactive communication is not adequately assessed, despite the fact that communication is a transactional process, i.e., teachers respond to feedback and alter their explanations since student perceptions require clarification (Brown).

Assessment practices need to take into account additional aspects of a classroom teacher's role, including those that involve persuading or influencing students' behavior and ideas; stimulating self-expression and imagination through creative activities; teaching social rituals such as taking turns and raising hands in class; asking questions, responding to answers, and leading class discussions (Feezel). Evaluations should also include such factors as a teacher's ability to communicate with parents, peers, administrators and professional leaders. Several states currently have plans to assess teacher-parent communication (Brown).

In addition, assessment officials need to address such issues as validity, reliability, bias and feasibility in the area of oral communication. To be valid, assessments must be based on conceptual clarity and have common objectives for classroom communication. To be reliable, there must be (1) consistent findings among observers monitoring the same individuals, or more training may be indicated to ensure adherence to a common set of standards; (2) adequate monitoring before oral proficiency is determined; (3) equivalence of topics and tasks for rating purposes. To be free of bias, care must be taken to ensure assessments do not favor certain patterns of oral communication. To be feasible, the proposed purchase of any new resource must be subject to a cost-benefit analysis of the time, money, and equipment that would be entailed versus the extent to which the resource would improve assessment of a teacher's classroom performance (Brown).

Furthermore, a distinction must be made in the skill levels that assessments focus on, i.e., facilities (speech mechanics such as clear speech and correct grammar) and critical skills (functions such as explaining, questioning and giving directions). Putting the focus on critical skills has the advantage of emphasizing the larger goal of instruction while still permitting assessment of instrumental behaviors, but preventing them from becoming ends in themselves (Brown).

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Do state assessments reflect current research?

There are a number of concerns in this area. One is that behavioral checklists do not accurately reflect the complex data obtained from teaching research, presenting the possibility that the complexity of teaching will be obscured and false conclusions drawn about what makes teachers effective. Another is that research findings are being used in teacher assessment instruments without appropriate regard for context, such as grade level, type of student, and objective, i.e., the educational purposes the instruction may be designed to serve. A third is that findings are currently used in teacher assessment instruments without regard for the curricular area being measured, viz., basic skills as opposed to conceptual/aesthetic understandings. A fourth is that the research base may be misused or findings diluted in a simplistic effort to fit an assessment purpose. These shortcomings impose a serious limitation on current assessment instruments (Book and Duffy).

How useful is the attempt to assess communication skills?

The effort to assess communication skills is commendable but the current process carries risks and drawbacks. In particular, it creates the impression that teachers can guarantee successful teaching by simply following certain research-identified behaviors. The phrase, "research says," is often used in an authoritative fashion in professional conference presentations, training sessions for assessment observers, and briefing sessions for teachers, without benefit of research qualifications or critical reviews (Clift).

Secondly, it may limit communications skills considered desirable to those currently assessed, with the result that only those educational purposes readily observed by current instrumentation will be regarded as legitimate (Clift).

Third, the current process may lead to valuing form over content. A teacher who shows superior vocal ability but is dependent on textbook explanations, for example, may be rated above another who is able to explain a difficult concept independently but does not do so in a manner conveying enthusiasm or non-verbal communication as specified by some states. South Carolina, for example, describes this as "intense or dramatic expression in gestures, movements, vocal inflections, or facial changes" (McCaleb, p. 21) (Clift).

Fourth, it results in observation instruments that focus more on teacher behaviors than on student actions because the attempts to link teacher behavior to student achievement (process-product research) make teachers responsible for student learning. Research on learning and memory, however, suggests that students themselves must play an active role in the instruction process. In focusing on instructors' verbal abilities, current assessment practices cast teachers into the role of actors or actresses, overlooking the role that is more appropriate for them, that of classroom directors. It also overlooks the teacher's responsibility for developing students' communication skills as well as students' part in their own instruction (Clift).

Fifth, it handicaps teachers assessed by observers who are unfamiliar with their subject but who, nevertheless, must evaluate their ability to communicate it. This might be overcome to some extent if observers could discuss the lesson with teachers before and after a class, giving them (observers) further opportunity to assess interpersonal skills and to understand a teacher's rationale for presenting the lesson in a certain way (Clift).

It is not necessary to completely abandon the way communications skills are presently identified. However, shortcomings in the current system need to be changed, a range of acceptable alternative behaviors identified, and a more flexible system of assessments implemented (Clift).

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Many of the following references—those identified with an EJ or ED number—have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. The journal articles should be available at most research libraries. The documents (citations with an ED number) are available on microfiche in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 700 locations. Documents also can be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Call (800) 227-3742 for price and order information. For a list of ERIC collections in your area or for information on submitting documents to ERIC, contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 293-2450.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Information, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-83-0022. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department.

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